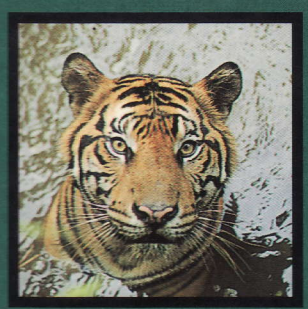
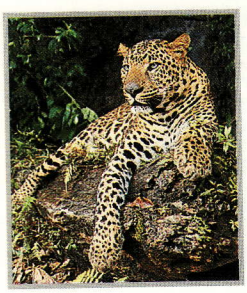
INDONESIAN HERITAGE

Wildlife



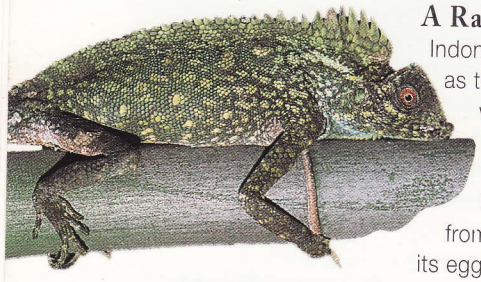
ARCHIPELAGO PRESS

Contents



Lizards

Lizards are perhaps the most familiar reptiles in Indonesia and are widely distributed throughout the Archipelago. Some 300 species are represented, with as many as 100 occurring in Borneo and 150 in Irian Jaya; many more await discovery and description. This diverse but poorly–understood group includes geckos which bark, agamid lizards which 'fly', and the world's heaviest and longest lizards.



*The angle–headed chameleon lizard (*Gonocephalus chamaeleontinus*).*

*Monitor lizards are well known for their agility and strength in climbing and swimming. The water monitor (*Varanus salvator*) is commonly found in most parts of Southeast Asia.*

*The frilled lizard (*Chlamydosaurus kingii*) has a thin fold of neck frills which are supported by two bony rods. This can be used to threaten would–be predators.*

A Range of Shapes and Habitats

Indonesian lizards cover a wide range of forms such as the legless worm lizards *(Dibamus leucurus* in western Indonesia and *D. novaeguineae* in Irian Jaya), the Borneo glass lizard *(Ophisaurus buettikoferi),* and the arboreal six–lined flying lizard *(Draco quinquefasciatus)* which glides from tree to tree, coming to the ground only to lay its eggs. There are also aquatic lizards, such as the water monitor *(Varanus salvator)* which catches fish in rivers, and water skinks *(Tropidophorus)* which hunt aquatic insects underwater.

The green crested lizard *(Bronchocela cristatellus)* is a common rural inhabitant, often seen in gardens as well as in riparian forests. This species can easily change its body colour and, because of this, it is often erroneously referred to as a chameleon. Another familiar rural lizard in Kalimantan is the common tree skink *(Apterygodon vittatum).* Its favourite resting position is on a tree trunk where it waits for ants, its main food.

Special Adaptations

Many species of lizard exhibit a feature known as 'caudal autonomy', whereby the tail can be shed when the animal is seriously threatened by a predator. The tail, which is sometimes brightly coloured, continues to wriggle for several minutes after it has separated, distracting the predator from the animal itself. Lizards with this ability automatically regenerate their tails, but this is a slow process.

Colour is an important feature in the life of many species. Male flying lizards have an extendible flap of yellow skin on their throats which they erect and 'flag' as a territorial display, while many skinks have bright colours which probably advertise their toxic flesh to would–be predators. A great majority of lizards have cryptic body colours which enables them to blend in with their backgrounds. The flying lizards, which are normally cryptically coloured, may have bright colours on their 'wings' which stretch across the bottom five to seven ribs. This form of colouration confuses predators which continue to search for the brightly–coloured prey that flew past, while the rather dull–coloured lizard escapes. These wings also enable flying lizards to launch themselves into the air and glide for distances up to 60 metres which ensures them a quick getaway from their would–be predator.

Giants of the Lizard World

Monitor lizards are mainly terrestrial species, but many are agile climbers and strong swimmers. Although monitors are widely represented throughout the country, this diversity is at its greatest in Irian Jaya, which boasts seven species, including the longest species, Salvadori's monitor *(Varanus salvadori)*, which can reach a length of three metres. The common water monitor *(Varanus salvator)* is a frequent scavenger around rubbish dumps in towns, although its natural home is the riparian forest where it catches fish and crabs. A related species, the earless monitor *(Lanthonotus borneensis)*, occurs in Borneo but, because it lives in burrows, it is rarely seen. It is only known because occasional specimens have been found during excavations. Its diet in the wild is unknown, although in captivity it will only eat fish.

ISLAND DRAGONS

When the first specimens of Komodo monitors (*Varanus komodoensis*) were brought to Europe in 1910 they were accompanied by stories of them reaching a length of 5 to 7 metres, but the longest that has been reliably reported is about three metres. No other large carnivore has such a restricted distribution as this lizard (which may weigh 150 kilogrammes). It is only found on Komodo and adjacent islands: an estimated 7,000 Komodo monitors, including some 1,500 hatchlings, are found on these islands.

Although generally described as scavengers it seems that they prefer to eat fresh rather than rotting meat. Their main prey are deer and pigs but a variety of other animals is also taken. Their appetite is prodigious: a hungry adult is able to consume 80 per cent of its own body weight in a day. They can also survive for long periods without food. The saliva of Komodo monitors carries all manner of unpleasant organisms and festering sores resulting from an attack by a monitor are often the result of an untreated bite. This ensures that a deer or other prey which is wounded, but escapes, will probably die a few days later when it can be easily tracked by its smell and eaten as surely as if it had been killed outright.

Hollow trees and burrows are used frequently as shelter from heat and cold. Smaller monitors often seek refuge in tree holes and, although larger individuals use holes dug by porcupines, civet cats and rodents, they dig most of their own burrows along dry river beds and on open hillsides. They can swim quite well and will enter salt and fresh water without encouragement. Komodo monitors are most active during the day and are capable of travelling up to 10 kilometres in a day. They have been known to reach a speed of 18 kilometres per hour.

Bacteria from the Komodo's mouth is reputed to obstruct quick healing from its bite.

KOMODO MONITOR'S LOCOMOTION AND ANTICS

1. *The Komodo or* ora *is the largest and most powerful monitor in the world.*
2. *Sharp claws aid the monitor in the tearing of its victim's flesh.*
3. *The Komodo is a fearsome predator with its blunt snout and serrated teeth.*

Household Tenants

The lizards most familiar to city-dwelling Indonesians must be the house geckos, but they represent just a fraction of the family Gekkonidae. Kuhl's gliding gecko *(Ptychozoon kuhli)*, for example, resembles the flying lizards in being able to glide from one tree to another. The remarkable cat gecko *(Aeluroscalabotes felinus)* can retract its claws into its digits, just like a cat. Indonesia also has a number of, as yet, undescribed species of eyelid geckos *(Cnemaspis)* characterised by their diurnal habits and round pupils. One newly-described species from Lombok raises its tail over its back when alarmed, possibly to mimic the defensive posture of scorpions.

Geckos can be quite vocal, having a repertoire unmatched by other reptiles. The short bark commonly heard in the forests of western Indonesia is generally that of the barking gecko *(Gekko smithi)*, although it is rarely seen. This gecko produces two large eggs which are glued to the trunk of a tree and it is known to lay eggs at the same site repeatedly for at least two years. The powerful call of its close cousin, the tokay *(G. gecko)*, is commonly heard from suburban and rural houses when it sits in spaces which seems to amplify its call. These giants of the gecko family are known to overpower and eat large insects, small birds and snakes.

Skinks

Skinks are an extremely diverse group of Indonesian lizards. More than a dozen species can sometimes be recorded from a single site, from the forest floor to the canopy. Some species of skinks are aquatic and many are burrowers. Unlike geckos, which sit and wait for their prey, skinks actively search for invertebrates and their larvae. The *Mabuya* skinks, which include the shiny common sun skinks (*M. multifasciata*) that are often seen basking in the sun, are generally quite large. *Lygosoma* skinks are very different, being matchstick-thin, with generally bright red tails, and have rudimentary legs. Their movements and appearance are reminiscent of the poisonous centipedes which they seem to mimic. Also represented in this group are many species of *Sphenomorphus* skinks, although identification of these can be quite difficult.

*Tokay gecko (*Gekko gecko*) eating a smaller lizard.* ««« *This giant tokay gecko would put up an aggressive front if threatened by humans.*

*The sail fin lizard (*Hydrosaurus amboinensis*) is a common species in Sulawesi.*